

# Wordsworth and the Thought of Affection: “Michael,” “The Force of Prayer,” “Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle”

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*This essay questions the recent New Historicist and historicist claims that Wordsworth’s poetry is reactionary from well before his alleged “decline” after 1807. We propose that a poem is not simply the linguistic reflection of either the ideological limitations of its author or his time. Through readings of three poems taken from the beginning and the end of the “great decade”—“Michael,” “The Force of Prayer” and the “Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle”—we argue that Wordsworth’s poetry is neither a mimesis of his personal ideology nor of something called “Romanticism.” However, this is not to evacuate the poetry of its mimetic aspect. After Adorno, we argue that Wordsworth’s work is consistently occupied with thinking feeling—in particular, the feeling of affection or love. The thought of affection (the cognitive content of a particular kind of mimesis, as well as the affection vital to his thought) is at the center of Wordsworth’s art and is explicitly theorized in the poet’s 1801 letter to Charles James Fox. The radical locality of Wordsworth’s poems, their close attention to the texture of individual feelings (and the thoughts that make such feelings experience), render the kind of generalized description of his poetry found in historicist commentators unworkable. Wordsworth’s writing, we suggest, is a repeated attempt to marry thought and feeling as aesthetic experience.*

Wordsworth’s “great decade” is bounded by the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 and *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807. It is difficult, however, to regard the poetry of 1807 as the triumphant culmination of Wordsworth’s achievement. “The Force of Prayer,” for example, although published in that year, eventually served as an epilogue to 1815’s

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ill-received and now neglected *The White Doe of Rylstone*. Thus it can hardly be described as a poem of culmination. “The Force of Prayer,” in fact, represents a transition in Wordsworth’s work, and is a precursor of the kind of poetry that characterizes his middle and late career—that of an Anglican, a Distributor of Stamps, a man patronized by a Tory lord.

Unlike Shelley, Geoffrey Hartman does not identify “Wordsworth’s decline” (14) with the poet’s apostasy (that is, with the rejection of youthful radicalism in favor of the orthodoxies of Church and State).<sup>1</sup> Instead, Hartman argues that the problem with the later Wordsworth is that he “never really renounced his younger self: he secretly canonized it, and much of his later poetry is written in bad faith” (15). By 1807, Hartman suggests, Wordsworth writes as one who has resolved the conflicts that are the dramatic center of the unpublished “poem to Coleridge.” The mature poet thus counterfeits his authority, as though “standing on ground already beaten; the brilliant quarry has been dislodged; the hiding-places will not yield more” (15).

Recently, however, critics have increasingly questioned the idea that, after 1807, Wordsworth retrospectively imputes a more conservative politics to his earlier self and work. In his influential book *Wordsworth’s Second Nature: A Study of the Poetry and Politics* (1984), James Chandler suggests that Wordsworth begins to reject his youthful Republicanism at the very beginning of the “great decade.”

Through the anti-aesthetic assumption of poetry’s identity with ideology, Chandler contends that “between 1793 and 1798–99 a profound reversal has already taken place in Wordsworth’s politicized epistemology, i.e., in his understanding of the mind and its alterability” (83). Indeed, according to Chandler, the poet falls under the spell of Edmund Burke as early as 1798. In this reading, it seems that Wordsworth’s art has always been an aesthetic ideology, or at least primed to become one.

Chandler’s position is, in fact, a development of Jerome McGann’s characterization of Romantic aesthetics in *The Romantic Ideology* (1983). McGann argues that, for Wordsworth and his contemporaries, art “can transcend the conflicts and transiencies of this time and that place” (69). In other words, Romanticism shirks real political engagement by embracing as true the illusions of reconciliation it posits in works of art. In the 1980s, this position became the New Historicist orthodoxy that, in a number of different forms, still dominates Wordsworth studies today. Marjorie Levinson’s *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* (1986), for example, finds Wordsworth peddling—in “Tintern Abbey” particularly—“if not natural values, then undetermined and apolitical ones, [that] define a negative ideal: the escape from cultural values” (16). And in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (1989), Alan Liu reads Wordsworth’s entire *oeuvre* as politically suspect:

Nature, time, affection, self, mind, imagination and other such Wordsworthian ideas, in sum, are ideological stopgaps: the final, hardened denials of the “literariness” by which rifted and broken texts—themselves a less cogent attempt at denial—communicate the underlying chasms of history. (48)

New Historicism tends to regard art as false consciousness, and sometimes as plain lies. Whereas for Hartman, 1807 is significant as the moment at which Wordsworth begins

to peddle a reactionary ideology, for many political and New Historicist critics the question of Wordsworth's "decline" is displaced by claims that his work is always already reactionary. Thus critical judgments on the later poetry tend to assume that it reflects Wordsworth's bad faith. Reading then concerns itself with identifying the precise date at which the poet gives up the struggle against his essential conservatism.

In this essay, we question the idea that a poem is simply the linguistic *reflection* of either the ideological limitations of its author or his time. Through readings of three poems taken from the beginning and the end of the "great decade," we will argue that Wordsworth's poetry is neither a mimesis of his personal ideology nor of something called "Romanticism." This is not, however, an attempt to evacuate the poetry of its mimetic aspect. Rather, we follow Theodor Adorno's argument that as a production of both intellect and affect, art attempts "to rescue, *in the medium of the concept*, the mimesis that the concept represses" (*Hegel* 123; emphasis added). In short, we suggest that while mimesis is central to art, there is also an irreducible conceptual element: art organizes, distinguishes and analyzes, in at least a semblance of reason. In art, feeling is mediated through reason, reason through feeling, in order that the sensual and the intellectual register as experience. Art is not the dumb imprint of an individual author's politics or the prevailing ideology of his society: it is, instead, an attempt to think, and, in particular, an attempt to think mimesis. Art mediates—without forcing a false reconciliation—the sensual with the rational and the rational with the sensual.

In what follows, we propose that from "Michael" to the poems written at the beginning of his alleged "decline" (poems such as "The Force of Prayer" and "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle"), Wordsworth's work is consistently occupied with thinking feeling—in particular, the feeling of affection or love. The *thought* of affection (the cognitive content of a particular kind of mimesis, as well as the affection vital to his thought) is at the center of Wordsworth's art, and is explicitly theorized in the poet's 1801 letter to Charles James Fox discussed below. The radical locality of Wordsworth's poems, their close attention to the texture of individual feelings (and the thoughts that make such feelings *experience*), render the kind of generalized description of his poetry—particularly to be found in Hartman—unworkable. Wordsworth's writing, we argue, is a repeated attempt to marry thought and feeling as aesthetic experience, a poetry of the interdependence of the concept and its fleeting sensual object.

## Part One

Wordsworth's letter to Fox discusses the question of the relationship between thinking and feeling (knowing and mimesis) in poetry with reference to "Michael" and "The Brothers." Wordsworth begins his letter by describing how the "bonds of domestic feeling among the poor" are being broken "by the spreading of manufactures through every part of the country, by the heavy taxes upon postage, by workhouses, Houses of Industry, and the invention of Soup-shops &c. &c. superadded to the encreasing disproportion between the price of labour and that of the necessaries of life" (*Letters* 313). The result, Wordsworth argues, is alienation: "a rapid decay of the domestic affections among the lower orders of society" (313) whereby "parents are

separated from their children, and children from their parents; the wife no longer prepares with her own hands a meal for her husband, the produce of his labour; there is little doing in his house in which his affections can be interested, and but little left in it which he can love" (314).

Wordsworth's letter, and the poems it cites, reflect the breadth of his social sympathies at this time: he is concerned not only about the workhouse poor, but also about small proprietors such as Michael. His politics, therefore, do not seem limited to an altruistic or paternalistic concern for the "lower orders." Wordsworth is anxious, in fact, about the contemporary state of the bonds between individuals and land—bonds that, he contends, provide a basis for affection. For example, he maintains that the "little tract of land" the small proprietor owns "is a fountain fitted to the nature of social man from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn" (314–315). Yet ownership is just one instance of this relationship between people and place: the daily round of the mendicant described in his contemporary poem "The Old Cumberland Beggar" is another, equally important.<sup>2</sup> Each relationship provides the foundation for the "repeated experience and regular feelings" that Wordsworth endorses in the 1800 "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* (Prose 1: 124). In the letter to Fox, Wordsworth decries the mechanistic, and ultimately inhuman, quality of government policies and market forces that—blind to the delicate bonds between people and place—break up communities, dislocate individuals and destroy affection.

Wordsworth argues that social breakdown is the fault of a political system that, through its imposition of arbitrary social policies and institutions from above (soup shops and workhouses, among other things), subsumes individuals beneath the general category of "the lower orders." The poet addresses this argument to Fox on the assumption that the politician has a "constant predominance of sensibility of heart" that enables him to look upon men "as individuals," and to leave his "heart open to be influenced by them in that capacity" (*Letters* 313). Wordsworth suggests that this perspective is not only essential for political justice, but also exceptional for a politician. Thus, as a critic examining the political views reflected in his own poetry, Wordsworth justifies presenting the story of an impoverished shepherd and his half-built sheep-fold to, he assumes, the humane and sensitive leader of the Whigs.

The force of Wordsworth's diagnosis of social ills, combined with the urgency with which he interprets "Michael" and "The Brothers," lead one to expect that in the content of the poems there is a proposed cure. But Wordsworth encourages Fox to *read* the poems, thereby undercutting the authority of the letter's exegesis by implying that the poems are not exhausted in their supposed interpretation. While the concerns expressed in the letter may reflect a "politics," the poems give rational form to affection without subsuming feeling beneath an idea.<sup>3</sup> The poems cannot be translated into political theory. They offer the reciprocity of thought and feeling as aesthetic experience—arguably the condition of possibility of any political theory that would aspire to social justice. Adorno's views on the subject of the relationship of music to language are pertinent here: "In contrast to philosophy and the sciences, which impart knowledge, the elements of art which come together for the purpose of knowledge never culminate in a decision" ("Music and Language" 4). Pursuing knowledge, but refusing the call of

doctrine to simplify, “Michael” and “The Brothers” offer thought and feeling as complex experience.

Wordsworth explains that “Michael” and “The Brothers” were written to “excite profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts” (315). He restates this idea in “Michael” itself, claiming that while he was still a boy, the story “led me on to feel/For passions that were not my own” (30–31), and that he, in turn, will now pass the tale on

For the delight of a few natural hearts,  
And with yet fonder feeling, for the sake  
Of youthful Poets, who among these Hills  
Will be my second Self when I am gone. (36–39)

A very similar argument concerning poetry’s role in preserving affection is made in the “Preface,” in which Wordsworth describes the poet as “the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying every where with him relationship and love” (*Prose* 1: 141). Mindful affection is transmitted by the poet, and the bonds that have been distorted and broken by political and economic ideology are thereby reformed: “in spite of things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by *passion* and *knowledge* the vast empire of human society” (1: 141; emphasis added).

In Wordsworth, affection and sympathy for others is produced in the reader through the fine balance his art achieves between reason and mimesis. Wordsworth’s poetry gives pleasure, a vital component of affection and sympathy, through the play inherent in its refusal to negate itself in the name of a political “truth” that might be abstracted from it:<sup>4</sup>

We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with pain it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure (752).

Thus there is “an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure” (752) at the center of Wordsworth’s poetry of affection. However, affection is not uncritically presented as a first principle or truth in Wordsworth: it can become poisoned, transfixing individuals through an overwhelming sense of loss.

“Michael” explores the dynamic between affection and alienation by telling the same story twice. Michael’s relationships, labor, and expectations are initially described in the context of affection. After the loss of Luke, however, they are re-described in the context of alienation. In the first part of the poem, while Luke is still growing up, the relationships, labors and hopes of Michael and Isabel are represented by their cottage, the light that shines from it “a public Symbol of the life,/The thrifty Pair had liv’d” (137–138). The cottage is known “by all/Who dwelt within the limits of the Vale,/Both old and young” as “The Evening Star” (144–146). Furthermore, when Luke is of an age, Michael

from a winter coppice cut  
With his own hands a sapling, which he hoop’d  
With iron, making it throughout in all  
Due requisites a perfect Shepherd’s Staff,  
And gave it to the Boy. (190–194)

The staff is another symbol—this time of the bond between Michael, Luke and the land they tend.

The fact that the cottage and staff are symbolic is significant. Marlon Ross argues that in “Michael” Wordsworth mystifies, through the naturalization implicit in symbol, his new (perhaps Burkean) approval of landownership (the “unnatural monster of primogeniture” [*Prose* 1: 43] that the poet had denounced in his 1793 *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*). Ross continues that the poem dishonestly attempts to conflate landownership with a notion of an “*original* and *natural* attachment of the folk to the land they inhabit” (*Prose* 1: 58).<sup>5</sup> His 1801 letter to Thomas Poole about “Michael” is further evidence of a possible Burkeanism in Wordsworth’s thinking about land:

I have attempted to give a picture of a man, of strong mind and lively sensibility, agitated by two of the most powerful affections of the human heart; the parental affection, and the love of property, *landed* property, including the feelings of inheritance, home, and personal and family independence. (*Letters* 332–333)<sup>6</sup>

However, as David Collings points out, from the opening appeal to those who will be Wordsworth’s “second Self,” the poem attempts to hand Michael’s “family heritage down to readers” (177). “Michael” offers the reader an inheritance that is “symbolic” in the popular sense: it stands in for, and thereby questions, the literal and blind attachment to inherited property described in the poem. Indeed, the poem calmly suggests Michael’s shortcomings as a proprietor, father and husband: he uncritically regards landownership as freedom (255–256); he “prematurely” puts Luke to work, and then reproves (albeit benignly) the child for inevitable inadequacies (197–201); he decides to send Luke to London without any discussion (254); and, having insisted upon a course of action, he loses confidence and attempts to retract his decision (305–308).

By the time the poem is written “The Cottage [... /] Is gone, the ploughshare has been through the ground/On which it stood” (485–487), and all that remains is the unfinished sheep-fold. The story of Michael’s life after Luke’s desertion is virtually a retelling of the same life, but the tale of affection has now become one of alienation. The cottage and staff have been replaced by the sheep-fold: the “life of eager industry” (124) and permanence is inverted in Michael’s solitary visits to the “straggling Heap of unhewn stones” (17). Alienated from Luke and Isabel (the latter disappearing from the narrative at Luke’s fall, only to reappear after Michael’s death), the land is no longer a “rallying point for ... domestic feelings” through which Michael may express affection for his family. Whereas the completed sheep-fold would have been a symbol of the bond between Michael, his son and their land, the unfinished structure (in effect, a ruin) is a broken symbol—an allegory.

For Gershom Scholem, an important influence on Walter Benjamin’s thinking about allegory, symbol “makes something transparent which is beyond all expression” (the love of a father for his son, for example) and “is intuitively understood all at once” (27).<sup>7</sup> Allegory, on the other hand, bears no such intuitive meaning, “but consists of an infinite network of meanings and correlations in which everything can become a representation of everything else” (26). In allegory, interpretation proliferates. Michael’s ruined sheep-fold becomes an allegory, then, because as a sign it is predicated upon the



failure, or rupture, of any intuitive symbolic meaning. Indeed, the sheep-fold suggests that history has taken revenge on Michael's attempt to fix and naturalize his family name through property. This melancholy allegory reveals Nature—and any human history that would present itself as natural—as eternal only in its transience.

Michael is now in thrall to his decayed affection: "many and many a day he thither went,/And never lifted up a single stone" (474–475). The sheep-fold has become a dead weight that oppresses him. In the terminology of the third of the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, Michael's affection for his land and for his son has now become a "counter-spirit," no longer a phenomenon that will "uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet," but one that is "unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve" (*Prose* 3: 185–188). In the poem, however, the unfinished sheep-fold is not simply a melancholy allegory that reflects the broken covenant between Michael and Luke. Containing at the same time a memory of hope and failure, it *mediates* affection and alienation through each other. The allegory of the sheep-fold, it appears, liberates the conceptual in the mimetic. In "Michael," neither affection nor alienation is allowed to harden into a brute fact of feeling that prohibits further consideration: alienation is predicated on the loss of affection, and affection is predicated on the possibility of alienation. The poem mimetically captures the way affection itself sustains Michael's sense of loss. Thus, by telling the same story twice, and through the doubled significance (as both symbol and allegory) of the sheep-fold, the poem introduces alienation as a *critique* of affection, while also positing affection as a critique of alienation. There is no simple social or political lesson in "Michael," but by way of a critique of false affection and false alienation the poem facilitates hope for the marriage of social life and truth. As Wordsworth's ideal reader, and through "the repetition and continuance" of reading, Fox may thus "be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated" (*Prose* 1: 129).

While it is possible to claim a correspondence between the aesthetics of "Michael" and the politics of the letter to Fox, "The Force of Prayer" and "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle"—both featuring wealthy, land-owning aristocrats—appear unlikely examples of Wordsworth's continuing interest in the relation between affection, alienation and truth. Continuity between "Michael" and the later poems is indeed difficult to establish, particularly because of the change in the poet's approach to writing in the years that separate them. These two "medieval" poems reveal Wordsworth writing a verse that is less dependent on his own memory, and that attempts to pronounce on more public themes. Although still remaining geographically and historically focused, "The Force of Prayer" and "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle" appeal to the cultural material of legend rather than the private life of the poet.

To argue that "The Force of Prayer" and "Brougham Castle" are poems in which Wordsworth continues to affirm art (as the dialectic of thought and feeling) against alienation might look perverse. Not only are they minor poems, but their employment of legend looks abstract when compared to the personal and anecdotal setting of "Michael." Moreover, their extensive use of personification (a form of allegory) seems to contradict the ideal of democratic language advanced in the "Preface," and their protagonists—aristocrats rather than shepherds—appear to reflect Wordsworth's new

political and social allegiances. These suspicions are only confirmed by the context of composition. Wordsworth wrote "Brougham Castle" during an eight-month stay at Sir George Beaumont's home, and he probably conceived "The Force of Prayer" on a trip from there to Bolton Abbey. It was also during his time on Beaumont's estate that he began attending church services regularly. In short, this was a period in which Wordsworth had begun socializing with the landed gentry and worshipping formally in church.

Despite these very different compositional circumstances, there are reasons to link the three poems due to their shared preoccupation with the question of autobiographical origins. This preoccupation is made explicit in "Michael" as the beginning of the poem recounts how Wordsworth heard this fragment of local history as a boy. The links are equally strong in "The Force of Prayer" and "Brougham Castle," but in these cases they remain submerged. The poetic locales of the two later poems are, for Wordsworth, equally resonant to that of "Michael," and although Wordsworth neglects further explanation, he had known, from childhood, the issues of inheritance connected to these places.

Kenneth Johnston has made some reference to this issue in *The Hidden Wordsworth* when discussing Clifford, the protagonist of "Brougham Castle":

[Wordsworth and Coleridge] headed back to Penrith for Coleridge to get the stage. Stopping at Threlkeld on the way, Coleridge recorded another superstition Wordsworth told him: "In the Civil Wars beyond [*sic*] York & Lancaster a Clifford, Earl of Cumberland, wandered about under Sattelback [*sic*] & deemed by the Shepherds an astronomic mysterious man." This Henry Clifford was a spirit after Wordsworth's own heart, for he had been deprived of his estates for killing the duke of York's son, and lived for twenty-four years as a shepherd on the lands of his father-in-law, Sir Lancelot Threlkeld. The "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle" (1806) was composed on the occasion of the happy outcome of his penitence ... This idea of the worthy son restored is the biographical leitmotif to *The Prelude's* dominant theme, "Imagination, How Impaired and Restored." (Johnston 689)

The issues of disinheritance and restoration that Wordsworth explores in these poems, have, like "Michael," an autobiographical resonance that is not only emotional, but also geographical. Brougham Castle is only two miles from Penrith, where Wordsworth had been sent to live with his Uncle following the death of his father. The same castle also appears in *The Prelude* (1805) in an early memory of Dorothy and Wordsworth's time together, in the context of which, Wordsworth resonantly describes his sister as one who is "Now after separation desolate/*Restored* to me" (6.216–217; emphasis added). Clifford, the protagonist of "Brougham Castle," also appears in *The White Doe of Rylstone*, and Wordsworth knew about and was interested in him in much the same way that he knew about Michael: as a local man, a disinherited man, and a lover of Nature.

"The Force or Prayer" contains very similar connections. Romilly—the drowned son in the poem—also appears in *The White Doe* as "The noble Boy of Egremound" (230), and again there are strong local connections for Wordsworth here. Historically, it was as a direct result of Romilly's death that the barony of Egremont passed to the



Lucys (of *The White Doe*), and Egremont itself is close to Cockermouth, Wordsworth's birthplace. Both Cockermouth and Penrith are deeply ingrained in Wordsworth's own memories of his father's death, his removal from home, his separation from Dorothy and, of course, the origins of the Lowther debt, Wordsworth's own very real disinheritance.

In short, these three works share common thematic preoccupations (ownership, inheritance, disinheritance, father-son relationships, and so on), and in each case, Wordsworth looks to his childhood in order to explore these questions. Even at this stage of his career, it seems that Wordsworth is continuing to work on autobiographical material.

## Part Two

"The Force of Prayer" narrates the story of the founding of Bolton Abbey in the twelfth century. Characteristically Wordsworthian, the poem establishes a link between a locality and affection through an act of memorialization. It commences with the opaque question, "~~What is good for a bootless bene?~~," which the narrator explains is the pronouncement of unending grief to a Lady: her son Romilly, we learn, has drowned in the River Wharf. The formality of the poem is thus immediately established in the first line. Apparently far removed from the autobiographical anecdote that frames "Michael," this is an arcane Middle English expression printed in an antique typeface. "The Force of Prayer" is a legend, and almost by definition without a clear origin. Indeed, it is telling that this story about a beginning—the foundation of an abbey—obscures its own (biographical) genesis: its very existence, like its language and theme, seems curiously autonomous.

It appears, then, that this poem has succumbed to the ascendancy of mimesis that Hartman observes in Wordsworth's later career. The refusal of the poem to explore its origin seems to be an abdication of the rational: reason and feeling have finally become separated from—alienated from—one another. However, by virtue of its relative aesthetic autonomy, the poem stages its own imitation of this divorce of mimesis from reason. It thus avoids simply reflecting an image of a condition "external" to it. We will suggest instead that "The Force of Prayer" allegorically treats the alienation of mimesis from reason as its subject, thereby *negating* the negation that is alienation. The poem, then, is not under the spell of alienation but itself casts a spell over it.<sup>8</sup>

The Lady's devastation at her son's death is compounded by her widowhood. The loss of Romilly means the end of her family name:

He was a Tree that stood alone,  
And proudly did its branches wave;  
And the Root of this delightful Tree  
Was in her Husband's grave! (49–52)

But the boy (like Luke, who experiences a "fall" in London) is also isolated in the poem. He is portrayed as a solitary, "ranging high and low" (14) through Barden Woods, holding "a Greyhound in a leash,/To let slip upon buck or doe" (15–16). There is no

gentle affection for the natural world here: Romilly is an arrogant fell destroyer who, like Sir Walter in “Hart Leap Well,” is happy to blend his pleasure with the sorrow of quiet creatures.

Together with his dog, Romilly reaches the ravine through which the Wharf flows:

And the Pair have reached that fearful chasm,  
How tempting to bestride!  
For lordly Wharf is there pent in  
With rocks on either side.

This Striding-place is called THE STRID,  
A name which it took of yore:  
A thousand years hath it borne that name,  
And shall, a thousand more. (17–24)

Romilly is oblivious to the solemnity of this ancient place. To him, the Strid is an amusing challenge, “tempting to bestride.” But, in the poem, Nature brings a sudden end to his insouciance:

He sprang in glee,—for what cared he  
That the River was strong and the rocks were steep?  
—But the Greyhound in the leash hung back,  
And checked him in his leap.

The Boy is in the arms of Wharf,  
And strangled by a merciless force;  
For never more was young Romilly seen  
Till he rose a lifeless Corse! (29–36)

Unlike the boy in “Nutting” who, despite (or because of) an act of violence, learns that “there is a Spirit in the woods” (54), Romilly has no respect for either Nature or place.<sup>9</sup> Deaf to low murmurings, he is blind to grim shapes. His resulting death is a black parody of real affection. “The arms of Wharf” that initially intimate an embrace, turn contiguously into hands that strangle, and there is an implication of filicide in the boy’s death. Given that Romilly’s mother is never named, but only referred to as “the Lady,” the assignation of the title “lordly” to the Wharf cruelly suggests Romilly’s dead father. The final irony of this passage is that, through Romilly’s death, Wharf thwarts the transmission of the family name (the father’s name), whereas that of the Strid continues unscathed: “A thousand years hath it borne that name,/And shall, a thousand more” (23–24). Nature appears to mock the Lady’s hope for her family to be remembered.

As in “Michael,” affection in “The Force of Prayer” is volatile. The deaths of both her husband and son leave the Lady with no one to whom she can express anguish. Like Michael, she must carry her “endless sorrow” (7) alone, and she is left cut off from society at the end of the poem. People are almost entirely absent: the only other person mentioned is the Falconer, but as a servant, he cannot share in, and thus lessen, her grief. There is no place for affection in this short work, only for sorrow; no home is ever described, and the only building that looms into view is Bolton Priory itself, founded by the Lady in an attempt to overcome her misery:

Long, long in darkness did she sit,  
 And her first words were, "Let there be  
 In Bolton, on the Field of Wharf,  
 A stately Priory!" (53–56)

The building, raised on the "Field of Wharf," is, notably, built on the site of Romilly's death. The poem's position in regard to this act is highly ambiguous. The Lady herself, like Michael, is portrayed by the poem as broadly sympathetic (if, like Michael, in error), and both of their memorials appear to be hallowed. But her act of remembrance, like Michael's sheep-fold, for all its grandeur is pathetically inadequate. Indeed, Nature dissents against this attempt to impose affection arbitrarily on place. Following the erection of the Priory, "Wharf, as he moved along,/To Matins joined a mournful voice,/Nor failed at Even-song" (58–60). Wharf's song is an unsatisfactory accompaniment to the Priory's memorial observations, and casts the same shadow implicit in his earlier personification as Romilly's father.<sup>10</sup> The Lady has, perhaps, invested too much of her grief in the survival of her name; like Michael, she comes to find that *things*, such as a river or a sheep-fold, now present an uncanny aspect, and possibly even have a power over her. The situation is further complicated by the narrator's claim that if anyone other than her son had died, the Lady might have taken solace from "Old Wharf," who "might heal her sorrow" (44). However, one could argue that having displaced her natural human sorrow into a desire for posterity, the Lady now finds that the Nature that was once dead to her has returned with a grimace. Of course, there is deep ambiguity in the poem over whether the Lady's memorial act is hallowed or mocked by Nature. In fact, it seems that the poem maintains this fine poise in order to deploy piety and parody reciprocally, the one criticizing the pretensions of the other.

The end of the poem is a trite conclusion that only emphasizes the solitude of the Lady who seeks a "Friend" (68) in a transcendent God rather than in the divine love incarnate in human affection. The inadequacy of her lonely theology is apparent in the formality of the poetry itself. The presence in this work of prosopopoeia (a figure associated with allegory) and unconventional typescripts does not, then, amount to the poet's resigned acceptance of a distance between himself and his subject. Here, allegory might, in fact, be construed as the mimesis of alienation. With a mind to overcoming alienation, Wordsworth's allegory attempts to know it fully—that is, at the level of both intellect and affect. Paul De Man's famous definition would support such a view:

Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. (207)

Symbol effects a naturalization of the relationship between signifier and signified (it matters little whether such naturalization is a function of naivety or deliberate mystification), but allegory dwells in the gap. While symbol carries with its own blindness and delusion, allegory's disenchantment of symbol becomes a form of insight. This knowledge, however, remains negative—neither mimesis nor cognition are given supremacy, nor are they synthesized. Any attempt to make allegorical knowledge positive could,

after all, negate its critical force and lead to a premature spiritualization—the return of the false totalization of symbol. As the mimesis of alienation, allegory thus puts affect and reason into dialectical relation. Alienation produces the consciousness that gives form to, and thereby understands, feeling.

While “The Force of Prayer” is a mimesis of the alienation it depicts—that mimesis engendering a (rational) critique of false affection—“SONG, AT THE FEAST OF BROUGHAM CASTLE, Upon the RESTORATION of LORD CLIFFORD, the SHEPHERD, to the Estates and Honours of his Ancestors” does not attempt to overcome alienation. Here, alienation functions as an index of lost affection. The poem is not tempted to race towards an image of cohesive affection, and it resists any attempt to erase evidence of alienation. Tarrying with the negative, Wordsworth aesthetically captures alienation as the evacuation of experience, thinking feeling through its absence.

“Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle,” like “The Force of Prayer,” is medieval in setting, and makes extensive use of a framing narrative (that of the minstrel), a technique that again departs from the affectionate intimacy of Wordsworth’s anecdotal verse in *Lyrical Ballads*. The minstrel establishes and maintains the decorous formality of the poem by pouring his tale through a specific ideological filter that repeatedly arranges its protagonists into emblematic scenes.

Set just after the Wars of the Roses, the minstrel’s strain that opens the poem describes the harmony and peace across the land that has followed the reunification of the houses of York and Lancaster:

Both Roses flourish, Red and White.  
In love and sisterly delight  
The two that were at strife are blended,  
And all old sorrows now are ended. (11–14)

The restoration of Lord Clifford (of the House of Lancaster) has been made possible by Henry Tudor’s ascent to the throne. From the outset, with its statement that Henry’s victory over Richard III at Bosworth was assisted by “Earth,” “St. George,” and “blessed Angels” (27–29), the poem liberally employs the kind of “personifications of abstract ideas” that Wordsworth had disavowed in the “Preface” (*Prose* 1: 130). There, Wordsworth considers the use of such language in poetry to be “arbitrary and capricious” (1: 124), and in the “Appendix” he argues that while for early poets such figural language arose from the “passion excited by real events,” these figures have become a *sign* of poetry rather than the thing itself, merely an “extravagant and absurd language” (*Prose* 1: 162). The celebration of Clifford’s restoration and social reunification that opens “Brougham Castle” is, therefore, not what it seems. This scene of communal celebration, uniting every section of society, “Knight, Squires, or Yeoman, Page, or groom” (40), and ostensibly so different from the sad isolation of the Lady in “The Force of Prayer,” is saturated with the language of division and counter-spirit. No one speaks in this petrified scene: it is a frieze.

The greater part of the minstrel’s song describes the life of Henry de Clifford himself. Following the early death of Clifford’s father, the child’s life was perceived to

be in danger. Dispossessed and alone, he was taken into hiding. Clifford was disguised and placed in the countryside, where he was raised as a shepherd, initially at Londesborough, near York, and later, under the care of Sir Lancelot Threlkeld, near Keswick. Henry grows up a "happy Youth," courted by emblematic fauna that recognize his lordship, and it is odd, in this Wordsworthian tale of a boy growing up in rural Cumbria, to hear that "The Eagle, Lord of land and sea,/Stoop'd down to pay him fealty" (124–125). In the minstrel's narrative, Nature only has meaning when translated into the cultural/mythic terms of Brougham. At the same time, inanimate objects take on living qualities because of the central role they play in the mythology of the Castle. Weapons become monstrously animated in the minstrel's description—"Swords that are with slaughter wild/Hunt the Mother and the Child" (61–62). As Walter Benjamin remarks about the condition of human beings living under the self-imposed dominion of myth: "once human life has sunk into the merely creaturely, even the life of apparently dead objects secures power over it" (132).

The minstrel may falsely regard the natural as artificial, and the inanimate as animate, but his account is a true mimesis of the assumptions underlying his song. For him, there is no Nature that is not subsumed beneath his cultural perspective. His value system is predicated on warfare and domination rather than affection and relationship. Thus the tale ends with the minstrel's hope that the restored adult Clifford will now "head the Flock of War" (160), and again, inanimate objects speak: "'Quell the Scot,' exclaims the Lance" (148), shields long for the blood of battle, and fields tremble and groan (151–153). At this point, the minstrel's tale ends, to be replaced by the voice of the modern "Wordsworthian" narrator of the first four lines of the poem. This voice points out the error of the minstrel's belligerence and is thankful that Clifford did not fight, noting that in him "all ferocious thoughts were dead" (170).

The new narrator goes on to explain that Clifford's years as a shepherd had taught him a reverence for Nature. He had not returned to Brougham Castle to dominate underlings or exploit his domain for selfish pleasure (as Romilly could be said to do), but "long compell'd in humble walks to go,/Was softened into feeling, sooth'd, and tamed" (163–164). "Love had he found in huts where poor Men lie" (165), and without violence in his soul, or thought of revenge, he has now assumed power.

Despite being at the center of the social unification described above, Clifford does not speak in the poem. As the Wordsworthian narrator implies, Clifford does not conform to the feudal role anticipated by the minstrel's reified world-view and narrative, and having been educated by Nature, he is not properly part of the system. It appears that Clifford's lyrical, first-person voice cannot be heard through the minstrel's allegorical tale. The Wordsworthian narrator, however, is still able to discern Clifford's affections through the minstrel's song. The narrator's ability to "hear" Clifford suggests that the abstractions of allegory point towards hidden affection. Walter Benjamin suggests as much when he writes: "it is fallen nature that bears the imprint of the progression of history" (180). In the outmoded, the cast-off and the ruined, the otherwise impenetrable carapace of history is pierced to reveal its human content. Thus, the minstrel's alienating song is not to be expunged. Like the sheep-fold in "Michael," it is all that we have—an allegorical sign that can tell a lyric tale if patiently read. Just as

allegory can speak of the melancholy of historical transience, so too can it offer hope that history need not always remain the same, that change is possible.

Such an end to the poem forestalls the conclusion that "Brougham Castle" longs for the good old days and then fantasizes their return. Once restored, Clifford neither simply brings a whole and living relationship with Nature into the Castle, nor succumbs to Brougham's military heritage. He attends to the traditions of his House *and* the lessons of Nature. Like "Michael" and "The Force of Prayer," "Brougham Castle" discloses no easy moral. What starts as a fantastic, allegorical tale about a noble shepherd is rendered into a lyrical ballad that eschews any assertion of the ideology of hearth and home so destructive of Michael. No case is made for the consolation to be found in a wise balance between Nature and Culture. In this poem, the transmission of affection is enabled by the poem's work on the negativity of its own material.

These poems of 1800 and 1807, summon those "things silently gone out of mind and things violently destroyed" (*Prose* 1: 141) Wordsworth achieves this through an art that imagines, simultaneously, both the necessity and the inadequacy of a thought of living affection. "Michael" sets in motion the dialectic of affection and alienation to prevent the asphyxiating triumph of either; "The Force of Prayer" attempts to overcome alienation through its mimesis of the divorce between reason and feeling; and "Brougham Castle" listens for intimations of hope contained within negativity. Placing mimesis at the center of our readings of these poems from Wordsworth's "great decade" and the beginning of his "decline," we have not just discovered various images of the past, but an art that would reflect a better future before it has become reality.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

- [1] See the quatrain that ends Shelley's 1816 sonnet, "To Wordsworth":

In honoured poverty thy voice did weave  
Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,—  
Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,  
Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be. (10–14)

- [2] See David Bromwich's virtuoso reading of "The Old Cumberland Beggar" (30–43).  
[3] It is important to stress here that there is no suggestion that feeling is, at some level, unmediated. As Simon Jarvis argues:

When thinking comes to a halt with an *abstract* appeal to history, or society, or "socio-historical material specificity," of any other form of non-interrogable givenness, it might as well stop with God. Absolute sheer givenness, whether it is invoked by metaphysicians, "materialists," historicists, or anyone else, is a chimera. It is the demarcated nothing, the "empty space" of Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, a nothing which is supposed to permit the most undeluded thinking, yet which itself becomes a fetish—the fetish of nihilism. (24)

- [4] In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith posits the intimacy of sympathy and pleasure:

A man is mortified when, after having endeavoured to divert the company, he looks round and sees that nobody laughs at his jests but himself. On the contrary, the mirth



of the company is highly agreeable to him, and he regards this correspondence of their sentiments with his own as the greatest applause. (10)

- [5] In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1789), Burke argues that continuity of property ownership is essential to the organic constitution of the nation: "The power of perpetuating out property in our families is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to ... [property], and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself" (102).
- [6] See Bromwich 322.
- [7] See Susan Buck-Morss 229–237, for a discussion of Scholem's impact on Benjamin's work.
- [8] In a discussion of Modernist art, Adorno writes: "Because the spell of external reality over its subjects and their reactions has become absolute, the artwork can only oppose this spell by assimilating itself to it" (*Aesthetic Theory* 31). Art cannot resist alienation by boldly asserting its opposite. However, through the "mimesis" of mimesis, the artwork can formally reintroduce mediation—and thus thinking.
- [9] Bromwich quotes Shelley's *Peter Bell The Third* to argue that "Nutting" wakes "a sort of thought in sense" (120).
- [10] It should be noted that matins and evensong are not sung for the dead.
- [11] See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 131.

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